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**Subject:** Hoosick Falls/POFA Clips

## **Hoosick Falls confronts poisoned wells and an uncertain future**

By Scott Waldman

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Politico New York

HOOSICK FALLS — This town knows from hardship.

Like many upstate communities, it has seen jobs disappear for generations as factories closed down, one by one, lured away by the promise of cheaper costs or simply shuttered, their products no longer wanted or needed.

But when the federal government announced late last year that the town's water supply was tainted and dangerous to use, it was a blow of a very different sort. The factory closings cost jobs. The poisoned water might cost lives.

Now, Hoosick Falls, a town of some 4,000 people, is the site of one of New York's worst environmental crises in years. Television news crews and print reporters are an almost daily presence on the town's main thoroughfare, Route 22, and men, women and children unaccustomed to the spotlight are growing tired of once again being asked to describe how they feel about the poison in their water supply.

News that the wells contain PFOA, a cancer-causing substance produced by factories that made Teflon, came at a time when the town seemed poised to join the revival that has taken place in other upstate towns in and around the Hudson Valley. Just 18 months ago, village Mayor David Borge was crowing about a new \$1.3 million building rising in the center of town in a vacant lot. A columnist for the Albany Times Union described Hoosick Falls as "the kind of place that seems primed to attract families looking for a great place to raise children."

And there was reason for optimism. The giant National Guard armory that spans a block of the village's center had recently been converted into an arts and education center. An unused rail bed was being turned into a bike path. A campaign called Hoosick Rising was promoting the town's comeback to the outside world. A vacant school was being converted into condominiums. Large apartments were being built in a downtown that has hemorrhaged people for so long, few in town even remember when it was vibrant. A general store, featuring local goods, was being considered for the ground floor. Through the hard work of those who had faith in its untapped potential, Hoosick Falls had a future again.

Now, however, there is a fear that such bright promise is again slipping out of grasp. The blow

has been difficult to absorb. But Hoosick Falls is home to people who have been working for years to revive the town and its future. And they are not going to let that hard work go to waste.

“This is not the first hurdle,” said Aelish Nealon, a town resident who runs an after-school program and who led the effort to convert the armory into an arts hub. “Like any rural community, there have been difficulties in the past. I see this as a problem that will be solved.”

The problems in Hoosick Falls mounted quickly.

It had been more than a year since Michael Hickey questioned his father’s untimely death from cancer and had the village’s water tested. The test came back positive for a toxic chemical. Even after he shared those results, state and local regulators assured village officials that it was safe to drink from the tap.

Then, last December, the federal Environmental Protection Agency issued a warning that it was dangerous to consume the water in any way. The state Department of Health quickly reversed its findings and also declared the water unsafe. Almost overnight, Hoosick Falls went from being a town on the verge of a revival to the site of an environmental disaster.

Hickey said he wishes Hoosick Falls officials had put as much effort into addressing the PFOA crisis as they did into promoting the village’s comeback.

The pollution of Hoosick Falls’ water with the toxic chemical perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA, already has caused a raft of issues: Banks have stopped writing mortgages, development projects have stalled and school children say they fear staying there after high school graduation.

Meanwhile, the federal and state probe of the pollution has expanded beyond the town water supply, with investigations of the soil in the town’s Little League baseball field and at spots beyond the town center where illegal dumping may have occurred for years. Meanwhile, state and federal investigators still don’t understand the full extent of the health impacts on the town. PFOA is a man-made chemical used in the manufacturing of non-stick goods, which Hoosick Falls specialized in for decades, and it enters the body through water, the air and food.

Students from the Hoosick Falls school district held their own press conference in February to request a new water system, which they feel is exactly what the town needs to bounce back. Several said the state’s response would determine whether they would move back to the region after college. They said they were tired of listening to adults merely talk about solutions, and that it was a “moral imperative” to restore safe, clean water for the village.

“This is not just a desirable solution, it is quite simply the only acceptable one,” said Anna Wysocki, a 17-year-old high school senior. “What we feel we need is confidence and hope for the future.”

The EPA is investigating whether PFOA may have seeped into village wells when workers cleaned smokestack filters and other equipment at the Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics factory, which the company purchased in the 1990s. Other factories in town may have also used

the chemical, as the village shifted away from manufacturing farm equipment to making equipment for industry. A number of factories in town made non-stick products such as Teflon-coated conveyor belts, stain-resistant carpeting and packing materials. Much of it used PFOA, which could have been spread across town in a number of ways, including from the dust that settled across the village from factory smokestacks.

In April, the state Assembly is expected to hold hearings on water quality issues in light of Hoosick Falls. Certainly, lawmakers will question state and federal officials about the slow response to the crisis in Hoosick Falls, and why the state Department of Health assured residents they could drink their water for a year before reversing that position.

After the finger-pointing is over, however, Hoosick Falls must figure out the far more complex question of how it becomes a thriving village once again.

Saint-Gobain has agreed to pay for a new \$2 million carbon filtration system for the town's water, but many in Hoosick Falls think that's not enough. They want an entirely new water source. And while a filter will keep out the PFOA, some won't ever trust it. They say it could malfunction. Besides, Hoosick Falls is dotted with aquifers, which are sprinkled throughout its bedrock. Surely there is another source. What state and federal regulators are trying to determine, however, is the extent of the pollution. That could take months or years.

Upstate New York is populated with decaying towns built in an era of prosperity last enjoyed by the grandparents of those who are still left. Many are blessed with a richness of architecture, buildings with crown molding, high tin ceilings and wide-plank wood floors, and a relative affordability that makes them appealing to those in bigger cities where a 3,000-square foot home with a sweeping porch is for millionaires. Some of these towns are situated along the Hudson River, or in the mountains, near skiing and hiking and farms. The dream of every resident of every crumbling upstate town is to bring its potential in line with its reality.

Towns that embrace these unique attributes rise again, become a place where young people want to move, to remain and raise families, start farm-to-table restaurants or antique stores. In a number of them, including Troy, Hudson and Beacon, a viable renaissance is well underway.

Hoosick Falls has such promise. It rises above the Hoosic River and its mansard-roofed factories and Victorian homes still look like they did when Grandma Moses painted them almost a century ago. The town is part of the gateway to Vermont's Green Mountains, where skiers back up along busy Route 22 in the winter and hikers stop to hit the nearby Man of Kent pub in the winter. Yet it's close enough to white-collar jobs in Albany and Bennington to attract people who can afford to renovate a Victorian or buy a condo in a Catholic school being converted into apartments. Seven colleges are located within a 30-minute drive.

Locals shake their head as they drive by the new building which the mayor unveiled a year and a half ago, wondering if it will succeed in bringing back economic prosperity. It's a short walk from that building, which seemed to symbolize a renewed faith in the future, to the ruined shells of factories that once employed hundreds and now sit vacant, stripped of their machinery, copper pipes and anything else worth even a few dollars. Some in town fret that Hoosick Falls will

always be the place that a Google search associates with its tainted water.

For a moment, though, let's turn off the 6 o'clock news with its live shots from Hoosick Falls. Skip the invasion of reporters and ignore the constant comparisons to Flint, Michigan, where government malfeasance poisoned an entire city through the lead in its pipes.

Focus instead on someone like Nealon, who has printed buttons that read "I (Heart) HF" and who transformed the National Guard's shuttering of the town armory into a new opportunity for a major community center. The armory is a 19th century, castle-like structure, with turrets that tower over the town. It has hosted art shows, weddings and even the funeral of a child where the number of attendees would have overwhelmed any church. It's where the Department of Health is drawing blood samples for residents concerned about PFOA in their blood and it's where state Department of Financial Services is helping people with mortgage and home insurance issues.

Nealon is part of the group that oversees the armory, which sat vacant for years. She willed it into a rebirth as a community and arts center. The arts center is where the future of Hoosick Falls will be plotted and realized. Important town meetings are now held there. The town court is in the front entrance. A music studio is upstairs. A catering company will operate out of the kitchen.

She sees a future for the town in the arts, and there, too, she has momentum. Globe-trotting visual artist Jenny Holzer lives in Hoosick Falls and works there. Holzer, who creates posters and visual displays of scrolling texts for museums across the world, embodies the new spirit of the village, Nealon said. She said it already has a tradition of being a quiet, affordable place where artists can create their work away from bustling urban life.

She expects Hoosick Falls to become the "poster child" for redevelopment, the living example of how a town can rebound from ecological disaster.

Municipalities from around New York and other states with vacant armories at the center of their villages and towns have already traveled to Hoosick Falls to see how they can be converted to other uses. And now they'll come to see how a town solves a crisis, she said.

"We're smart, we'll figure this out," she said. "We do the hard stuff really well."

A skeptic may easily dismiss Nealon's optimism, but she has a proven track record of bringing in major economic investment. Developer Jeffrey Buell said his company, Sequence Development, was attracted to Hoosick Falls partially because of Nealon's conversion of the armory. They're the company that just finished one of the largest new construction projects in downtown in many years.

Buell said he first visited the town in the summer of 2014 and thought it had a contagious spirit, with the possibility of an economic rebirth. He acknowledged he was "caught off guard" by the water crisis, but said his building had filled every apartment. The first floor space, which was considered as a general store, is still vacant, but he's so confident it will be filled, he's holding off leasing it as offices so that a new store will come to attract residents again to the town center.

Buell, too, has faith that the way Hoosick Falls recovers from the water crisis can be used as a future selling point. First, though, he said the town needs to solve its perception crisis. He wants to see water trucked in from Troy or come from a new aquifer deemed safe. The expensive costs can be divided between industry, and state and federal government.

“No matter what happens with the water right now, they will never overcome that perception problem,” he said. “If you run a new source, you overcome it immediately. If you’re talking about the extinction of your town, if it’s something as dramatic as that, maybe you jump in and do it.”

Even as the water crisis moves toward some form of resolution, the town is just beginning to grapple with the health effects of the PFOA pollution.

For now, there is the matter of tracing the health effects that have already occurred. Dr. Marcus Martinez, who helped blow the whistle on the problem after he noticed a high number of people visiting his office with unusual types of cancers, already is hearing from people who moved away and are now sick. Martinez, who survived an unusual type of lung cancer himself in his early 40s, said a number of young people have already been diagnosed with cancer or a serious health issue.

Martinez followed in his father’s footsteps as the town doctor. He makes house calls. He visits people in the hospital. His family knows the other families that have been in Hoosick Falls for generations. He expects the town will have to go through high school yearbooks to track down generations of the students who left and didn’t return to see if they are suffering any ill effects.

He said two to four generations of village residents could have had a dangerous, prolonged exposure to PFOA.

“When people start saying, I lost this relative to cancer and they’ve been here a long time, then that may become very real,” Martinez said.

Hours after the students from the Hoosick Falls school district held their press conference, Gov. Andrew Cuomo agreed to pay \$10 million to plan for the construction of a new water supply and to install carbon filters in 1,500 private homes. But that’s only a small start.

Hoosick Falls already has inspired a new state response to water quality issues in municipalities across New York. Less than a week after the students’ press conference, Cuomo called Hoosick Falls a precursor to pollution issues in communities around the state, as state and federal regulators and health officials become more aware of the chemicals left behind by the manufacturing sector’s retreat. He created a Water Quality Rapid Response Team to identify and address drinking water contamination.

“We want to have the best state program in the nation to preserve water quality and spot problems before they come,” Cuomo said. “That team is going to coordinate rapid responses to emergencies like at Hoosick Falls etc., we’ll have the best regulations to protect clean water,

we'll understand what contaminants are being released and regulating them before they pose a problem and we'll be coming up with a comprehensive master plan.”

The effort will expand quickly. Another Rensselaer County town, Petersburg, recently tested positive for PFOA in its water. A different plastics factory caused that pollution.

Less certain is how much the state will spend, or pressure industry to spend, on Hoosick Falls. The companies likely responsible for the pollution have billions in revenue, as well as powerful legal teams and a history of battling against expensive mitigation solutions.

A new water system for the town will cost about \$25 million, according to GOP Assemblyman Steve McLaughlin, who represents the area. He agreed that finding a new water source will be the main path to the town's rebirth from the crisis.

Without the feeling that it's safe to turn on the tap, it's tough to persuade people to move to town, or to stay there, he said.

“Psychologically, the most important thing is to get that water in place so that they have the feeling of turning on that water and they know it's good,” he said. “I don't see anybody feeding that to their baby, or pet bird, or themselves.”

Hoosick Falls can ill afford to spend tens of millions of dollars on a fix, without significantly raising taxes across the board. The state has already put up millions in taxpayer funds. The state Department of Environmental Conservation has determined that Saint-Gobain, which owns the factory linked to the pollution, and Honeywell, which previously owned it, are to blame and the federal EPA could conclude the same by the end of the year.

However, for now, the companies have only committed to less expensive fixes, like installing a carbon filtration system, paying for blood tests and bottled water. Less clear is their willingness to fund a new water system. Spokespeople for both Saint-Gobain and Honeywell each said their companies were committed to working with state and federal regulators, but the significant bills have not yet been forwarded their way.

No one in town has any illusions that Hoosick Falls will be easily reintroduced to the world.

The challenging work will really begin when the news cameras stop showing up and the reporters move on, said Ken Facin, superintendent of the Hoosick Falls schools district. He doesn't want government or industry officials to falter on any promises.

“We have to see this to completion,” he said. “Until this is over, the hard part is keeping everybody to their word so we don't see the minimalist solution.”

Facin said he wants to keep up the public pressure, to ensure that Hoosick Falls is the place where local graduates like Wysocki, the student who called the situation a “moral imperative,” can return after they finish college.

Wysocki said she and her friends were so focused on getting new water for Hoosick Falls, they haven't had time to talk about the future, to discuss whether they will come home for good some day.

One thing is certain: Hoosick Falls will need them.

A version of this article originally appeared in the spring 2016 issue of POLITICO New

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## **In Bennington, Leahy promises stricter drinking water regulations**

Mar. 22, 2016, 5:37 am by Bennington Banner 9 Comments

VT Diggers.com

BENNINGTON — U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont) says he will push for stricter regulations for drinking water and on toxic chemicals, as well as more federal funding for the EPA.

He also pledged support to connect the homes with private wells contaminated by a manmade chemical onto public water systems.

Leahy visited Bennington on Friday to meet with officials and residents over PFOA, or perfluorooctanoic acid. "Ask a parent if they want money to make sure their children are getting clean water — or do they want another war," Leahy said, addressing residents, officials and the press. "I don't have to take a poll to know the answer to that."

Several times during his visit, Leahy referenced the water crisis in Flint, Mich. But he stressed that Bennington is not another Flint and applauded the response from Vermont's legislators and officials.

"I'm willing to bet Vermont would never close its eyes to it like the governor's office did in Michigan," he said. "[PFOA contamination] is something new. We're here to help."

Residents still have unanswered questions. It's unknown how far PFOA contamination has spread into the ground and water. Also unclear is how exactly it got there — whether through the air or water. While studies link chronic exposure with certain cancers, scientists aren't entirely sure how it affects the human body. And it's unclear how the chemical affects agricultural activities.

But officials say their highest priority is to make sure no one is drinking contaminated water. Residents with private wells within 1.5 miles from the former Chem-Fab facility, 1030 Water St., should sign up for well testing and bottled water.

The state's information hotline is 802-828-1038. A website with data, maps, and other resources

is: [www.anr.state.vt.us/dec/PFOA.htm](http://www.anr.state.vt.us/dec/PFOA.htm).

An emergency operations center is at the state's Department of Health offices at 324 Main St.

Testing is ongoing

Of 185 private wells tested by the state, 100 had PFOA levels above Vermont's limit of 20 parts per trillion, according to Chuck Schwer, director of the state Department of Environmental Conservation's Waste Management and Prevention Division, and the state aims to test more.

The highest levels were close to what is believed to be the source: The former ChemFab facility at 1030 Water St., where Teflon products were made starting in the late 1960s. The Saint-Gobain Corporation eventually bought the company, closed it in 2002 and moved operations to New Hampshire.

On March 10, the state took samples from rivers, lakes and streams. Samples are expected back from the lab, which is out of state, in about two weeks.

'There's a lot we don't know about it'

The direct health effects of PFOA are not entirely known, according to the state's Department of Health Commissioner Harry Chen.

"There's a lot of uncertainty. But making sure people have clean water is the most important thing," Chen said.

PFOA is an "emerging contaminants" not regulated by the EPA.

"There's a lot we don't know about it," Schwer said.

Schwer said soil sampling in the area, including the ChemFab site, began this week. That will help scientists determine how PFOA affects wildlife and livestock, commercial farms and home gardens, and even maple syrup.

Trying to calculate how much PFOA is absorbed by, say, a leaf of lettuce, is "a challenging task," according to Chen, and those studies could take weeks.

Chen said the Center for Disease Control will help the state with blood tests for PFOA. The state hasn't yet tested any blood, he said, noting the logistical challenges of collecting that many samples.

Short term, long term solutions

Saint-Gobain said it will pay to deliver drinking water to village residents and will install carbon filtration systems at each affected home. The French multinational company is doing the same in Hoosick Falls, N.Y., the home to one of its factories. PFOA has also been found in Petersburg,



N.Y., where Taconic Plastics is the suspected source.

Leahy, echoing remarks made by Gov. Peter Shumlin at a community meeting Wednesday, said he will push for a long-term solution of connecting homes to the municipal water systems, which don't contain PFOA.

Schwer said state engineers in Montpelier and those contracted by Saint-Gobain are looking into that now. More should be known in three to four weeks, he said.

Leahy, who serves on the Senate's appropriation's committee, said he is requesting more money for the EPA. He said laws relating to toxic chemicals need to be overhauled, with many having been grandfathered in without ever being tested. He said he hopes both Democratic and Republican lawmakers can work together, but noted, "a lot of them don't like environmental legislation — unless something happens in their community."

Some politicians argue against environmental legislation because of a high cost, he said.

"Those are the same people who wrote a blank check for war in Iraq and Afghanistan," Leahy said.

Deep concern among residents

A dozen residents greeted Leahy at the North Bennington Train Depot just after 1 p.m. Friday. Among them was Matthew Patterson, chairman of the village board.

"We as the village didn't create the problem, but want to be part of the solution," Patterson said.

Ellen K. Viereck was one resident who signed up for well testing Friday. Her Shaftsbury home on Cold Spring Road is about a mile away from the train depot.

"I'm very concerned about it," she told Leahy.

Mirka Prazak told Leahy she's lived in the village for 20 years and is paying off the mortgage for her home. She's on public water, but she's concerned about what will happen to property values in town.

Will homes need to be reassessed? Will the state pay to make up the loss in taxes the community needs for its coffers?

Leahy said he believed once the water contamination is removed from private wells, property values should be fine.

"It seems like there are so many dimensions to this, and one doesn't know where to begin asking questions," Prazak said in an interview with the Banner.

She said she left Wednesday's community meeting at Bennington College — where Shumlin and

others reviewed well testing results and other state efforts — with a hollow feeling in her chest.

Prazak said she thinks Bennington is a great community, but she's worried news of contamination will discourage new residents from buying a home and moving here.

“The whole community is tainted by this.” Contact Edward Damon at 413-770-6979.

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## **PFOA contaminates US drinking water**

Activists demand action against industrial chemical use

Published: 16:15 March 22, 2016

By Mary Esch

Gulfnews.com

Now, with the suspected cancer-causing chemical Perfluorooctanoic Acid (PFOA) being phased out in the US, it is still very much around, turning up in the water in factory towns across the country — most recently in upstate New York and Vermont — where it is blamed by residents for cancers.

The latest cases have brought renewed demands that the Environmental Protection Agency regulate PFOA the way it does arsenic, lead and dozens of other contaminants, and set stringent, enforceable limits on how much of the substance can be in drinking water.

“Where is the government that is supposed to protect people and the environment?” says Tracy Carluccio of the Delaware Riverkeeper Network, which uncovered PFOA in New Jersey tap water a decade ago. “It’s an outrage.”

In their defense, EPA officials said that the agency has been considering for years whether regulations are needed for PFOA and related perfluorinated chemicals, but that it is a drawn-out testing and evaluation process dictated by the federal Safe Drinking Water Act. In the meantime, the EPA has taken action around the country to fine companies and force them to clean up such chemicals.

For now, there are no mandatory limits on how much PFOA, also called C8, can be in drinking water. The EPA ordered nationwide testing of water supplies in 2013.

Of 4,764 water supplies, 103 systems in 29 states had trace amounts of PFOA, but none exceeded 400 parts per trillion (ppt), the EPA’s advisory level for short-term exposure — water you drink for only a few weeks. Seven had levels slightly over 100 ppt, the new advisory level for long-term exposure — water you drink for years — that the EPA is expected to set this spr

But the EPA's national survey didn't tell the whole story. Towns the size of Hoosick Falls, New York, whose water supply serves just 4,500 people, weren't included in the testing. Its PFOA level of 600 ppt was discovered in village wells in 2014 only because residents, concerned about what they perceived as a high cancer rate in the plastics factory town, demanded testing.

More recently, testing turned up PFOA at about 100 ppt in drinking water in nearby Petersburg, New York, and North Bennington, Vermont, which also have plastics plants. On Tuesday, Vermont officials said a second round of water testing in North Bennington yielded readings of up to 2,730 ppt.

New York governor Andrew Cuomo warned that PFOA and other chemicals will probably be discovered in the water across the state and country.

"We allowed waste disposal in fashions that, in retrospect, were not prudent," he said, "and now, in many ways, we are paying the price as a society."